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Esoteric Theravada: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia

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KATE CROSBY, *Esoteric Theravada: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia*. Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2020. XIII, 320 pp. CAN \$24.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-61180-794-

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Given the nature of the phenomena that Kate Crosby is striving to cover in *Esoteric Theravada: The Story of the Forgotten Meditation Tradition of Southeast Asia*, it is impossible for any single review to do justice to her work. Indeed, the same can be said for the practice of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* (“old style meditation”) itself, as there is a sense that the monograph in question only scratches the surface; nonetheless, building off the work of scholars like François Bizot and Olivier de Bernon, and complementing current research being done by Phibul Choompolpaisal, Andrew Skilton, and others on Buddhism in Southeast Asia, Crosby’s book represents a watershed moment in the study of meditation. *Borān kammaṭṭhāna* has perhaps the earliest documented roots of any extant meditation tradition in the Theravada world (100-101). In fact, a manuscript on *borān kammaṭṭhāna* practices from Sri Lanka formed the basis for the first Buddhist meditation publication in English by T.W. Rhys Davids in 1896 (*The Yogāvacara’s Manual*),¹ but this tradition was largely misunderstood or overlooked in scholarship in the century since. Yet with Crosby’s new monograph, scholars and lay audiences have one of the most comprehensive and accessible overviews of the historical context, theoretical bases, and “delivery method” of the “old style of meditation” overlooked not just by scholars, but by the Theravada tradition itself.

¹ Rhys Davids, T.W. *The Yogāvacara’s Manual* (London: Pali Text Society, [1896] 1981).

The first strength of this monograph is its balanced approach in appealing to both specialists of Theravada Buddhism and non-specialists, those personally interested in contemplative practices and those steeped in the academic study thereof. In terms of its lay audience, the structure of the monograph helpfully resembles a textbook, where the main arguments and the flow of these arguments are consistently made explicit, and referenced and explained in terms of the work as a whole. Indeed, Crosby tells her readers time and again what she is going to do, why, and how the discussion fits into her overall plan at any given point. To complement this structure and to distil her major points, she also ends each chapter with a brief conclusion, which aids in facilitating the transition to the next chapter. The chapter summaries are a welcome form of repetition that not only guide the reader, but place more onus on the author to make her argument lucid and coherent. Crosby also weaves basic concepts of Buddhism into her prose and offers illuminating discussions on the metanarratives of Buddhist Studies as a field, when such metanarratives intersect with her monograph (especially in the first, second, sixth and seventh chapters). These two features are not only beneficial to the lay reader but are executed in such a way as to appeal to the specialist—or at least not to bog them down.

For instance, Crosby takes time, if only in a clause or two, to explain what is meant by “Abhidhamma” (35), “Vipassanā” (40), and to clarify concepts like generative grammar, to which she devotes several subsections in the fourth chapter. Such explanatory asides are carried out in a manner that highlights the core features of the concepts and terms which are necessary to follow the arguments of the book, and to gain a better grounding for the unique idiosyncrasies of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*. In doing so, Crosby makes important distinctions considering mainstream interpretations of so-called Theravada orthopraxy, which serve as a helpful reminder to specialists to examine their assumptions and those in the

field as a whole; seasoned scholars are called to reflect on how such concepts are deployed in the unique setting of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* practice. For example, the extended explanation of generative grammar in chapter four, while clearly meant to be accessible to the non-specialist, takes on a wider significance when it is transposed to the context of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, where the idea of substitution is used to explain the internalization of positive states of mind (*kusala cittas*) and their mental concomitants (*cetasikas*) as sacred syllables in the body of the practitioner (124-126).

In terms of the specialist, Crosby weaves original research, novel interpretations, and new perspectives on old problems in the field of Buddhist Studies into her prose; this presentation offers much to be excited about for someone steeped in Theravada Buddhism or in the contemplative traditions of South and Southeast Asia. Her third chapter discusses the evidence for her research, which is especially insightful for graduate students, or more senior scholars entering the field, who need to familiarize themselves with the archival landscape; it offers many enticements for future areas of study and potential caches of source materials in need of attention. The other incentive for the specialist is that even when Crosby reviews, reinforces, or critiques well-hewn metanarratives and grand histories in the fields, which are a part of her evolving research, she manages to bring new sources to bear on these domains. Not only does she masterfully survey previous scholarship but she also enhances it with a fresh perspective. Her command over previous research and her special insight into their implications is particularly apparent in chapters one, six, and seven, wherein Crosby weaves the details of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* into the larger historical and political context of its eventual marginalization. By bringing together multiple academic trends, she sheds light on a relatively obscure practice. In so doing, the author provides fresh evidence for dominant interpretative models of decline and progress which challenge or reimagine these models in the process. It is a real testament to

her skill as a writer and thinker that Crosby can hold these two readerships together so seamlessly in a single book, without losing one or the other while also adding much to the experience of each.

Building on her earlier book from 2013 on the subject, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and its Modern Era Suppression*,² Crosby's primary objective in this new monograph is to provide an overview of the historical developments, the sources, the theory behind the technique, and the modern-era neglect of perhaps the oldest extant meditation tradition anywhere in the Theravada world, dating at least as far back as the fifteenth century. By using the emic term *borān kammaṭṭhāna* ("old-style meditation"), Crosby intends to demonstrate that it is based on Abhidhamma meditation theory and other traditional Theravada studies, such as generative grammar, medicine, and alchemy. Though this system of meditation is considered unorthodox in comparison to what she calls the "modernized" and "reform method" known as Vipassanā (Insight) meditation, which is associated with Burmese monastic figures like Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) and the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (1868-1955), it has historical roots. Starting in the second chapter, Crosby cogently demonstrates that on close inspection, *borān kammaṭṭhāna* shares much in common with the path of practice outlined in Buddhaghosa's fifth-century-CE *Visuddhimagga*, itself derived from the *Paṭisambhidamagga* and possibly influenced by an earlier but parallel text, the *Vimuttimagga*. However, despite this overlap, a central part of the monograph (especially the fourth and fifth chapters) is dedicated to showing that *borān kammaṭṭhāna* goes beyond the conventional understanding of Abhidhamma, as found in the *Visuddhimagga* and Vipassanā lineages; rather, it reanimates and reorients Abhidhamma concepts through the deployment of traditional South

² Kate Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and Its Modern-Era Suppression* (Hong Kong: Buddha-Dharma Centre of Hong Kong, 2013).

Asian epistemologies, like ayurvedic obstetrics and theories of grammatical substitution, towards a transformation, not only of the mind, but of the somatic totality of the individual. The result is that one literally imbibes or “infuses” the actual objects of meditation through the nasal cavity and one creates the body of the Buddha in their own physical domain, specifically in the “womb” (*gabbha*) of the female or male practitioner.

In this sense, Crosby’s underlying argument is that while *borān kammaṭṭhāna* seems to be an aberration from orthodox meditation methods, it is in fact true to the full enlightenment experience of the Buddha; for *borān kammaṭṭhāna* not only represents a creative development of the philosophy, grammar, and traditional worldview of Theravada Buddhism, it is firmly rooted in them. Furthermore, these methods are aimed at transforming the worldling (*puṭhujjana*) into an enlightened being (*arhat*) through the iteration of meditative aids (*parikamma*) such as signs (*nimitta*) or sacred syllables. Against this backdrop, the author claims that Theravada Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia—forced to respond to modernist discourses of science and religion, mind and body, and language and reality—sought to suppress or reform a method seen as overly dependent on irrational, bodily-based practices. In its place, these communities came to favour a supposedly rational and cerebral practice like Vipassanā, more a mind-science aligned with Western notions of the individual and the material world; *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, in contrast, was reliant on “resonating” forms of knowledge rapidly becoming obsolete, like the creation of protective geometric designs using sacred syllables (*yantras*), the alchemical transformation of mercury into gold, and other tantric-like practices that were antithetical to Enlightenment ideals. It is within this historical context, contends Crosby, that *borān kammaṭṭhāna* was forgotten, adapted, and even actively suppressed—with only a handful of living traditions practicing this method in the twenty-first century.

Putting aside chapters four and five, which are partly derived from her 2013 book, one of the first contributions that this monograph makes to the larger project is a mapping out of the textual and manuscript sources for *borān kammaṭṭhāna* in the third chapter. Not only does Crosby discuss and offer her translations of specific texts, but she also provides an overview of places where troves of texts can be accessed, such as at the National Library of Thailand; she points out how previous research on this meditation technique has contributed to her current work and identifies where future archival work is necessary. Indeed, several of the texts that Crosby utilizes for her study are little studied or previously misunderstood, such as the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā*, an eighteenth-century meditation “manual” consisting of 3,818 verses which the author makes ample use of, and reinterprets with the help of a manuscript from the British Library.³ While this text was published in 1963 by two Sri Lankan scholar monks, Galkātiyagama Ratnajoti and Karalliyaddē Ratnapāla, they “mistook” its “mathematical permutations and fine-tuned mnemonics for bad grammar and bowdlerized it beyond use” (176); Crosby’s most substantive contribution is the rectification of such misinterpretations. For a field that fetishizes texts prior to the first half of the first millennium (despite not having access to manuscripts dating this far back), such as the works of Buddhaghosa as opposed to later more localized sub-commentaries, the author’s attention to non-canonical Pali works composed in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka during the last several centuries is also crucially

³ The text that Crosby works from is the “*Amatākaravaṇṇanā*.” Unpublished manuscript, Or6601 (85) I (London: Nevill Collection, Asia and Africa Collections, British Library, around late 1750s). She uses this manuscript to correct some of the misinterpretations of Galkātiyagama Ratnajoti and Karalliyaddē Ratnapāla, who published the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā* under the name *Vimuttimaggā-uddāna* in 1963 (see Kate Crosby, “Differences between the *Vimuttimaggā-uddāna* and the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā*,” *Journal of Buddhist Studies*, no. 3 (2005): 139–151.

important, since Crosby provides examples of continual textual innovation in the second millennium in Southeast Asia.

A second major contribution of the monograph is the aim of bringing a finer resolution to the system of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* across its regional and linguistic diversity. That is, Crosby has taken some crucial steps in differentiating the unique strands and lineages of this form of meditation, both in terms of textual sources and communities of practice in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. With these steps, first taken in the second chapter, one can begin to see *borān kammaṭṭhāna* not only in the abstract or as a monolithic tradition, but as a dynamic practice with historical developments of its own and with its regional variations and innovations. Crosby's work in the sixth and seventh chapters is also helpful in this regard as she details how this method travelled from Thailand (Ayutthaya) to Sri Lanka in the middle of the eighteenth century by way of Thai masters sent to revitalize Buddhism on the island (and to strengthen the political influence of the Thai monarchy on the Sri Lankan court). The notes that the first generation of Sri Lankan students compiled under their Thai masters make up a critical source for *borān kammaṭṭhāna* during that period, especially regarding the advanced stages of the practice. The sixth chapter also highlights some of the developments of the old style of meditation in Thailand during a formative time when Thailand was recovering from its wars with Burma and was transforming into a modern nation state. This chapter details how the process of modernization, including the reforms of King Mongkut (r. 1851-1868) and his predecessors, affected the standing of this method as it moved from a central role in one of the first modern Buddhist revivals in the region to the periphery of Theravada orthopraxis.

Though, as Crosby begins to explain in the sixth chapter, the process was not one of straightforward linear decline across the Theravada

world, as some urban monks in Thailand maintained at least a textual interest in *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, preserving much of the textual material available to scholars and practitioners today (191-192, 200). This discussion sets up the seventh chapter, where Crosby shows how the old style of meditation was affected by monastic reforms and international diplomacy in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka, twentieth-century geopolitics in Thailand, and Marxist revolutions in Cambodia, where it saw a revival after the end of conflict there; however, the old style of meditation appears to face the threat of extinction once more, with few qualified teachers able to understand the texts handed down to them and with competition posed by the rise of Western medicine. For example, Western medicine began to encroach into the rural strongholds of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, undermining the traditional healing and protective practices associated with this type of meditation and depriving its teachers of one of their main sources of livelihood (223-225). In all, these chapters add to our understanding of the political and cultural facets of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, complementing Crosby's and others' discussion on its theory and practice.

In terms of theory, a critical contribution made by Crosby is her distinction between doctrine and "delivery method," which she introduces in the second chapter (48). The importance of this term is that it allows the reader to fit *borān kammaṭṭhāna* practices into the nexus of Buddhist thought, while allowing a means to distinguish and appreciate its innovations and unique qualities. In other words, Crosby is providing a theoretical framework to discuss the experience of doctrine as opposed to the philosophical study of doctrine in the abstract, a move that can help unravel, even if only slightly, some of the longstanding divisions and methodological issues in Buddhist Studies writ large; divisions include those between textual study and anthropology, or between doctrine and practice. Her framework is put to effective use in the author's treatment of *nimitta* or signs, in the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā* when compared to the *Visud-dhimagga* (45-48). Crosby readily admits that *nimitta* is not deployed in the

borān kammaṭṭhāna text for the first time as it has roots in Buddhaghosa's work. Rather, her nuanced but crucial point is that *nimitta* as a concept is employed in a unique way in the *Amatākaravaṇṇanā*, where it becomes the phenomenological scaffolding for the technique as a whole and is internalized in the body of the practitioner, in a manner that embodies the somatically transformative style of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* in general. These *nimitta* are incorporated in the technique, becoming a way-marker for the practitioner and teacher by providing both a schema to identify the stages on this path, and to identify objects to be imbibed and drawn into the body of the meditator. She also uses the idea of "delivery method" when discussing the "resonating technologies" of generative grammar, medicine, and alchemy, arguing that *borān kammaṭṭhāna* appears similar to Tibetan forms of Tantric Buddhism not because of shared texts or direct contact, but because both are influenced by common Indic methods of material transformation.

In all, Crosby does an excellent job of outlining the system and historical context of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*. She argues cogently for the reasons why *borān kammaṭṭhāna* was suppressed, showing how the scientific divide between body and mind, and the valorization of the latter acted to marginalize *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, along with monastic, regional, and international political changes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet I do have the sense that her investigation is set up according to her own terms, somewhat predetermining these findings. The fact that she begins the first chapter with Reginald Copleston and the Colonial Gaze ensures that, to some extent, she is never able to escape this gaze herself, filtering a large part of the history she reviews through the narrative of colonialism and great power relations. To be sure, her approach fits into an appealing scholarly paradigm that reinforces our forward-looking notions of progress and change, but perhaps one could argue that its explanatory power is overdetermined and somewhat question-begging. This is not to say that colonialization and later geopolitics did not influence the fate of

borān kammaṭṭhāna, but that we as scholars often fall into this “modernity trap” when trying to explain phenomena as complex as the marginalization of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*, which surely also has more localized and diffused causes.

Another possible issue is that Crosby lumps Vipassanā meditation into the cerebral category and *borān kammaṭṭhāna* into the corporeal category of meditation, but there is simply not enough known about Vipassanā in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to make this firm divide. The linking of Vipassanā with mental transformation is warranted but the practice cannot be reduced to the mere intellectual realization of Buddhist tenets. For example, in the *satipaṭṭhāna-vipassanā* practice taught by Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw, who was an early monk-pioneer of Vipassanā in Burma, bodily practices and awareness of the four postures were a critical part of his training regime. His technique was also ridiculed, according to his biography, as being overly focused on minor bodily practices. I think that Crosby is right in making the distinction between Vipassanā and *borān kammaṭṭhāna* on this point, but she perhaps overstates this distinction in support of her overall thesis about the decline of the latter. As there is so little known about the early decades of Vipassanā proliferation in Burma, one must be cautious in making any general claims about Vipassanā during this period, especially if this framing of Vipassanā is made to serve as a foil to another, even less well understood, type of meditation. Crosby’s argument is by no means undermined by this critique, and by the end of the book she entertains many possible reasons for the suppression and disappearance of *borān kammaṭṭhāna*. By slightly overemphasizing the differences between *borān kammaṭṭhāna* and a somewhat stereotyped presentation of Vipassanā, the apparent weakness of Crosby’s work becomes one of its major strengths, as she reveals the limits of the current state of knowledge around the historical developments of Vipassanā itself, giving scholars a reason to reconsider their own simplifica-

tions. By thus drawing attention to Vipassanā's Other, she has made a major leap in our understanding of both traditions, showing the need for a monograph on Vipassanā similar to what she has done for *borān kammaṭṭhāna*.

In the end, Crosby's well-researched, engaging, and expansive monograph breaks further ground on a set of research questions and materials that will keep scholars busy for some time. She has taken her reader to the edge of a new horizon, perhaps truly beyond the reach of anyone alive today. Crosby thus gifts her readers, both specialists and practitioners alike, with a glimpse into a new way to conceptualise the history of Theravada Buddhism, and South and Southeast Asian intellectual cultures. The work of imagining the now-extinct worldview of *borān kammaṭṭhāna* is now up to us.

Notes on the Contributor

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